THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Questions People Ask About God
Does God Provide?

October 24, 1999

John M. Buchanan

We open
a persimmon seed to find the tree
that stands in promise
Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear,
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not for a
new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.

Wendell Berry
"The Wild Geese"

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

DOES GOD PROVIDE?

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
October 24, 1999

Exodus 16:1-15
Matthew 7:7-11

"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?"
Matthew 7:9

Dear God, you have been by our side all week. You have stood beside us as we worked and talked and played and ate and slept. And now, this day, we acknowledge and celebrate the miracle of your presence, and we thank you for your faithfulness to us, even when we are not thinking about you. Startle us, O God, with your truth. Startle us with the beauty of your creation, startle us with the ways your creation provides for our deepest wants and needs, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Part of my education on the topic of God's providence began during my first year in college. We were not poor, but college was an economic stretch involving lots of part-time jobs, and getting by with a minimum of expenses, and no frills at all. It certainly did not include owning an automobile. My education on the topic of providence happened at Christmas time when, home for vacation, I met an acquaintance. Benny was his name. Benny was a fervent Christian in high school, much more zealous than any one I knew. He had gone off to a Bible institute to learn to be an evangelist. When I saw him he was behind the wheel of a brand new blue Buick. "Benny," I said, "What have you been up to? Where'd you get that new Buick?" "The Lord provided the Buick," Benny announced. "I needed transportation and I prayed about it and look what happened!" I wasn't satisfied with that so I probed a bit. "And just how did God get you behind the wheel of that fancy car?" I asked. And he told me that he had taken a weekend job at a church as youth director and he needed transportation so he prayed about it, and lo and behold, one of the members of the congregation bought a new Buick and gave it to him. "I praise the Lord every day for providing my Buick," Benny said.

I was puzzled and not a little envious. That Buick was a lot better than the seven year old used Oldsmobile we had, and which I occasionally drove. I was actually glad for Benny but I had a lot of trouble believing that God provided the Buick. I still do. In fact, I don't believe it. I do not believe God arranges convenient parking spaces—at least, on demand. I believe God does what God wants to do and could, conceivably, be arranging for a parking place or the quick and profitable sale of your condo, or a new Buick, for that matter. But I have trouble understanding why God would do that, and I have even more trouble with the notion that God can be prodded into action on our behalf by the persistence of our praying and asking. It never occurred to me to pray for a new car, or a parking space. It still doesn't. I do not think God is a celestial errand boy arranging things for our comfort! And so, I/we are left with a rather big and important question:

"Does God provide?" Or, how and what does God provide, if not Buicks and convenient parking spaces?

It is a basic theological issue, and one of the primal stories in the Bible addresses it, the story of the Exodus. God's people, you recall, were in Egypt. Originally, they went to Egypt during a famine to get food and they stayed. They prospered and grew in Egypt, so much so that they appeared to be a threat, so the Egyptians kept them in a ghetto and used them as forced labor to help with Pharaoh's ambitious construction projects. They groaned under their oppression. God heard their groaning and sent Moses to set them free. After painful negotiations and a series of terrible plagues, they are free, on the far side of the Sea of Reeds, at the beginning of the Sinai peninsula; a vast, untracked, inhospitable, hostile wilderness. They've been camping at Elim, which was an oasis, with water and food.

On the forty-fifth day, Moses leads them out of Elim and into the wilderness and they ask a very basic question—my favorite question, in fact: "What's for dinner?" You don't have to walk very far in that rocky wasteland to become acutely aware of your vulnerability and fragility. There is no water, no trees, no fruit, no vegetation, at least that you can see. And the very first day of what will be a forty year journey in that wilderness begins with the people of God complaining and saying, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread: for you brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

God hears the complaint and responds: "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you." And what happens next?—In the evening there are quails to catch and eat; and in the morning bread on the ground—manna.

What's going on here? Was Benny right? Complain hard enough, pray fervently enough, and you'll get what you want? Someone said recently that if you can explain miracles, they are no longer miracles, and while that is true enough, there are some interesting possibilities here.

In the Sinai peninsula, the tamarisk tree secretes a juice which congeals into a yellowish white flake. During the warmth of the day, it disintegrates. Rich in carbohydrates and sugar, it is still gathered by natives, who bake it into a kind of bread—and call it manna. And, in the Sinai, flocks of migratory birds flying from Africa often land and are so exhausted they can be caught by hand. (*Interpretation,* Exodus, Terence E. Fretheim, p. 182)

And so, if there is plausibility here, what happened was not supernatural intervention, but something quite ordinary, actually. The manna was there every morning, apparently, whether anybody ate it or not. God did provide, but the miracle here is that the people now see the resources at hand and now have the imagination and energy to pick up what is right in front of their eyes and use it. So, yes, God provides, but what God provides is part of the natural process. What the people need is there already. Yes, God provides, but there is on the human side of it, the requirement of recognition, imagination and ingenuity.

And the second observation is that God's provisions are daily: short term, not long term. The manna will not keep. It spoils rapidly in the heat. And so we're not talking here about long term capital accrual, just daily need, daily bread.

A third observation is that a crisis of need quickly becomes a crisis of faith. When life is threatened, the first thing to go is the people's trust in God's wisdom and providence, and they start to blame Moses for their predicament and by association, God. This really is God's fault, it seems.

Author Reynolds Price, has written a little book, *Does God Exist and Does He Care?* It's actually a long letter written to a young medical student, Jim Fox, who was struggling with terminal illness and wrote to Price, who had waged his own ten year battle with cancer. Jim Fox wanted to know: "Does God even knew about what is going on in my life? Is God there at all? Does God care at all about what's happening to me?"

With calmness and great integrity, Price responds to Jim Fox's question. "Yes, God exists." Price is sure of that; he draws on art, music, literature and his own personal experience to present the case for "the Creator's benign, or patiently watchful interest in particular stretches of my life," and that in a mysterious way he can't understand, God has been involved in his survival.

He wrote to Jim Fox:

> **"It's been my finding, and the finding of many famous doubters, that the simplest prayer, reiterated in the face of silence—'Stand by me here' or 'Guide me on,' or 'Face this creature you've brought to life and show him that this is at least your will'—may slowly or suddenly pry a chink of reliable light, and half-open window, a glimpse of a maybe passable road." (p.34)**

But, he tells Jim Fox, his connection "serves as no feather bed beneath me, no opiate." He knows that not every prayer for healing and wholeness or bread is answered affirmatively. (p.73)

The great miracle of the manna story, I think, turns out to be not the bread and quail, all of which were a natural part of what God created, but the fact that God heard the people cry in need, and shared the experience of abandonment and terror and despair, and came close enough so that the people knew God, knew they were not alone in the wilderness. Food to eat not only enabled them to survive but became a sacrament, a reminder of God's grace and love and presence, which they, we, need even more than food and drink.

On the same topic, Jesus once said to his disciples, "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." And then, I think, one of the most enigmatic things he ever said:

> **"Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone . . . .If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?"**

Well, it does occur to me that the people who originally heard these words, Peter and James and John, Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene, Judas and Mary, his mother—it occurs to me that everyone of those people knew from experience that there were times when a child asks for bread and doesn't get bread because there isn't any bread. And surely they also knew that there are times when a child asks and a parent says no, because the child doesn't need any more bread.

A friend of mine was telling me about a recent conversation with her adolescent daughter. Her daughter had asked to go on an extravagant trip. Her mother had decided it wasn't appropriate, and was too expensive, so she said no, to which the bright, and thoroughly modern young woman said, "Mother, I'm having trouble processing the concept of 'No'."

The point is that parents understand that the answer to Jesus' rhetorical question is that there are times you have to say no because there is nothing to give and sometimes you have to say no because even if you could, it would not be a good idea to give what the child requested.

Jesus surely knew that, so the question that remains is, if the answer is no, is God still providing something? Even if there is no bread to give, does something important happen between parent and child?

I'm reading Frank McCourt's new book, *'Tis*, the sequel to *Angela's Ashes*, the account of his childhood in Limerick, Ireland fifty years ago. *Angela's Ashes* is sad and funny and human: it's about a steadfast mother, an alcoholic and unemployed father who finally abandons his wife and sons, and their struggle to survive in dreadful poverty. *'Tis* is McCourt's story after he immigrates to America, goes to college and becomes a teacher. Much of both books, however, is about the relationship between parents and children in the midst of grinding poverty—when often there is literally no food to eat.

McCourt remembers the time he and his father and brothers laboriously cultivated a small plot of ground the government gave poor people to garden: how they cleared all the rocks and dug and planted potatoes, cabbage and carrots; and how they looked forward to harvesting and eating the delicious food. With his mother, he returned to dig up the vegetables, only to discover instead of potatoes, cabbage and carrots, a plot of freshly dug holes. That very day someone had dug up and stolen everything and he remembers how angry and humiliated, but also how gracious and stoic and dignified his mother was.

In America, McCourt fell in love with a privileged young woman from New York who lived in luxury, whose parents divorced and sent her away to be raised by an efficient but unaffectionate grandmother. McCourt writes:

> "She talks about how much she missed her mother and how she cried herself to sleep for months. . . .This makes me wonder if ever I had been sent to live in comfort with a relation, would I have missed my family? It's hard to think I would have missed the same tea and bread every day, the collapsed bed swarming with fleas, a lavatory shared by all the families in the lane. No, I wouldn't have missed that, but I would have missed the way it was with my mother and brothers, the talk around the table, and the nights around the fire when we saw worlds in the flame,

> and all kinds of shapes and images. I would have missed that even if I lived with a rich grandmother, and I felt sorry for her—who had no brothers and sisters and no fire to sit at." (p. 198)

She had everything she wanted and needed except a mother and family. He had nothing—except a mother and family. And that, it turns out, was what he really needed.

What do we need? Studs Terkel asked a cross section of Americans what they meant by the "American Dream" and wrote the results in a book *American Dreams: Lost and Found.*

One successful businessman answered:

> "The American dream is to be better off than you are. How much money is 'enough' money? Enough money is always a little more than you have. There's never enough of anything . . . .It's like a mirage in the desert: it always stays a hundred yards ahead of you . . ."

What God provides is more than food and drink; more than wealth or power or position. What God provides those who ask is presence and love and the assurance that even when there is nothing else, even when our requests are met with silence, there is one who hears and comes to stand with us, and provides for us in ways we cannot begin to comprehend.

Marvin Hyles and his wife, Nancy, publish a contemplative journal called *Daybook*, which I've been reading for years. There's a little meditation drawn from literature or poetry for each day, and an essay which Marvin writes at the front of each issue.

In the autumn issue, Marvin remembers going to summer camp in Michigan as a little boy. He was both fascinated by and terrified of the lake at the camp. He remembers standing on the shore watching the line of row boats and canoes, too afraid to venture out. When chums urged him to join them, he always declined, saying he was waiting for a friend. He writes, "I can stand on that shore today still watching, helpless to go out on the threatening water—dark, filled with wavy moss that concealed the slimy bottom and the cold mud."

Finally, on the last day of camp, he summoned the courage to sit on one of the boats and then he dangled his feet in the water and then, emboldened, pulled up the anchor and floated.

> "As I write now, I feel the sheer surprise of discovering, not only that I wasn't going to sink to the murky bottom where the water moccasins waited to sink their fangs in my leg, but that I was being supported by the water itself. The water had arms, like someone loving me and holding me. The water I had so feared could be trusted."

And then Marvin Hyles reveals why he told that story.

"I am grateful beyond the telling for that lake, the little boy, and the boat etched into my memory because today, Nancy and I stand ashore another dark lake. In May I was told I have cancer. In June I had surgery, in July I begin chemotherapy. We are, however, not obsessed with these waters. . . I remember that it was the dark water, the thing I feared most, that will support me. Somewhere something holds everything up! Somewhere all inheres in God's love. So we can give up trying to keep it all safe, under control, as we step off the beach and into this boat . . . .Oh, I so much wanted life to be as I dreamed, but it is not . . . .And yet what is, is a blessing . . . .It is time to be carried." (Autumn 1999, #34)

What we need is here, the poet, Wendell Berry assures us . . . the manna, the beauty, the wild geese, the people to love, the life to live, the food and drink, not only for body, but for spirit and soul.

There will come a day for each of us when our resources will not be adequate, a day when we know that if all we have going for us is our own strength, intelligence, professional accomplishment, prestige or power, we really are ultimately dependent. There comes a time when we know our need, our deepest hunger and thirst, and on that day, the promise is that God will be there, God will provide.

The great old hymn asks:

"Hast thou not seen
How thy desires e'er have been Granted in
what He ordaineth?"

It's my favorite hymn actually, and because of that phrase—that promise of God's providence, I have had it sung at all the important occasions of my life.

And another great hymn puts it:

"Guide me Thou great Jehovah,
I am weak but thou art mighty
Hold me with thy powerful hand
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me till I want no more
Feed me till I want no more."

Amen.

Fourth Presbyterian Church
Pastoral Prayer
October 22, 1999
John Cairns

O expansive God, in whom we live and move and have our being, we come haltingly into your presence, trying to figure out what we must do to be effective practitioners of prayer. We want to know how to ask so that we will receive; how to knock so that doors will open. We have allowed ourselves to be convinced that it all depends on us. Help us to let go.

Today we have heard the promises of your generosity—of the sufficiency of your goodness and grace. Now we would try to turn ourselves around, and to rely on that generosity and sufficiency. Help us, O God, to make it around that corner. Free us to be able to receive at least some of what you so willingly offer us.

Intermittently we remember that we are blessed people. We would capture this moment to remember and to offer our sincere thank yous for the fullness of our lives; for the glorious space that we occupy; for the human interactions that enrich our days; for the calls to service; for the opportunities to be children of God in public places; for wholeness beyond health and joy beyond satisfaction. Hear, O God, our words of thankfulness.

Knowing how we are pained by the state of your world, we can hardly imagine your daily anguish. We want to work toward the presence of your justice and your peace. We want to help this shrinking planet become something better—more holy—than it currently is. Take our intentions of this moment and sustain them—so that our words and our body language may speak inclusivity and welcome; so that our time and our energy may reflect a priority on healing fresh wounds and those of long-standing; so that our minds may grasp your words of hope and translate them for those who know only despair.

Work with us, Master Potter. Shape our understandings and our actions so that who you are will be well reflected in this small piece of your work. Make us instruments of your peace, messengers of your abundance, and grand examples of what you can do with meager lumps of humanity.

This is our prayer—and we offer it in the strong name of Jesus the Christ, who gave us a clear picture of what humanity can be, and who taught us to pray together saying . . ."Our Father . . .